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SUBJECT: Ambassador's September 16 Meeting with Assistant Foreign Minister Nguyen Duc Hung

1. (SBU) Summary: The Ambassador met for the first time September 16 with Assistant Foreign Minister (and Americas Department Director General) Nguyen Duc Hung. Following a brief discussion of VFM Phung's upcoming U.S. visit and Vietnam's efforts to reach out to members of Congress, the issue of religious freedom and the designation of Vietnam as a "Country of Particular Concern" loomed large. Hung described Vietnamese public opinion as "not happy" and said the Foreign Ministry would soon issue a statement. The United States had ignored the positive developments in Vietnam over the past several years in the area of religious freedom and in the lives of ethnic minorities, Hung stressed, and Vietnam's new religion law would guarantee freedom of religion and prevent forced renunciations. In addition, there were several instances of "fabrications" in the International Religious Freedom (IRF) Report. Vietnam hoped to find an "appropriate" way to resolve this, and urged the United States not to use "coercion," "sanctions," or "an embargo." Hung said that discussion of PM Khai's proposed visit to the United States and other aspects of a bilateral "way forward" should most appropriately be discussed after the U.S. election. On the subject of bilateral HIV/AIDS prevention cooperation, Hung said the MFA would actively participate in an interagency committee to be headed by the Ministry of Health. End Summary.

2. (SBU) The Ambassador, accompanied by DCM and Pol/C, met over lunch September 16 with Assistant Foreign Minister (and Americas Department Director General) Nguyen Duc Hung and Americas Department Deputy Director General Nguyen Ba Hung. This was the Ambassador's first meeting with AFM Hung. Hung opened by outlining the itinerary of Senior Vice Foreign Minister Phung's upcoming trip to Washington, D.C., and New York City, noting that VFM Phung would meet with Deputy Secretary Armitage on September 21 and IRF Ambassador

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Hanford on September 22. VFM Phung, who was in charge of "strategic research" and "relations with major powers," would also meet with a number of Senators on September 23, including Senators Lugar, Biden, Hagel, and possibly McCain. VFM Phung and delegation would then travel to New York City for participation in the UNGA. Normally, FM Nien would have attended, but responsibilities for the Asia-Europe Meeting (ASEM) would not allow this, Hung said. The GVN was particularly interested in UN Security Council reform, and agreed with the majority of nations that the UNSC's Permanent Members should reflect a balance of both developed and developing countries.

3. (SBU) Hung agreed with the Ambassador that Vietnamese delegations should also try to meet those in Congress who were "not happy" with Vietnam and added that, two years before, GVN representatives had tried to meet with Congressman Chris Smith, but that he had declined the request. Hung was grateful for the Ambassador's offer to try to help facilitate such meetings in the future and said that, in spite of differences with Congressman Smith and others regarding human rights and religious freedom, there were areas -- such as counternarcotics and preventing trafficking in persons -- in which there was no daylight between the United States and Vietnam. Senator Brownback and Congressmen Smith and Rohrabacher had strong convictions, Hung said, but there were those in Vietnam who also had strong convictions, and the bilateral relationship would benefit from both sides meeting, arguing, debating, and even disagreeing, as long as it was done in an atmosphere of mutual respect.

4. (SBU) Turning to the designation of Vietnam as a "Country of Particular Concern," Hung said that Vietnamese public opinion was "not happy" and the Foreign Ministry would soon issue a statement. This was "regrettable," and Vietnam could not agree with the designation. Vietnam had done much over the past two years in the areas of human rights and religious freedom, particularly after the United States had expressed concern about these issues. Vietnam understood the concerns of the U.S. Executive Branch, Congress, and the

American people, particularly the Vietnamese-American community. The GVN had a policy of equal treatment for all religions without discrimination, and this was particularly true for those ethnic minority adherents living in the Central Highlands. Compared to ten or twenty years ago, there had been many social, political, and economic changes in Vietnam. No society was perfect -- even the United States had to work to improve its own society -- and Vietnam was trying hard to raise the standard of living for all Vietnamese, including religious adherents and members of ethnic minority groups, Hung said.

15. (SBU) The United States had "ignored" the positive developments in Vietnamese society, Hung continued, and Vietnam was not happy. Hung recognized that people were displeased with the behavior of a "handful" of local authorities. Over the past two years, Vietnam had tried to follow the "mainstream" in the bilateral relationship and work for long-term stability. Many new elements in the relationship had emerged over the past two years, benefiting both countries. Human rights and religious freedom were sensitive and unavoidable issues between the United States and Vietnam. Both sides had to have an "appropriate" way to resolve this issue without "coercion." Hung urged the USG not to "go back to the history of sanctions and embargo" and, instead, work for the benefit of the two peoples.

16. (SBU) In response, the Ambassador stressed that the issue of religious freedom was an important one to many Americans. The United States sought the adherence of all nations to international standards of human rights and religious freedom. There had been improvements in Vietnam, but there were still those, some of whom lived in the Central Highlands, who did not enjoy religious freedom. Asked by AFM Hung what Vietnam could do to avoid sanctions, the Ambassador said that the establishment and registration of new churches in the Central Highlands would be a major step forward. How the new ordinance on religion was implemented would be another key issue. The Ambassador urged AFM Hung to help Mission staff to understand the situation in the Central Highlands by facilitating unrestricted travel there. While systemic change in Vietnam was critical, the release of high-profile prisoners would also have a positive impact. Forced renunciations presented a major problem, and finding a way to prevent these would be a significant, welcome step, the Ambassador said. However, dealing with the designation issue was complex, and there was no "automatic" way to get Vietnam off of the list.

17. (SBU) Hung said he and his colleagues would study these steps and discuss them with Ambassador Hanford. However, Vietnam already had measures in place to respond to many of the USG's concerns, but apparently not to the extent that they met the "understanding" of the United States. New churches had opened up and the GVN had reduced the sentences of high-profile prisoners. Unfortunately, there were some "incidents" in the IRF Report that were "groundless" and "fabricated," such as the reports of a rape of a pastor's wife or the killing of religious followers, Hung argued. The Ambassador urged the GVN to give us its take on the IRF Report, particularly in areas it felt the USG was wrong. It was good to have a dialogue on the facts, and it was not the intent of the United States to have incorrect information in our report, nor was it in our interest to do so.

18. (SBU) On the subject of forced renunciations, Hung said that, according to Vietnam's new law on religion, forced renunciations would simply not be allowed in any form. The GVN guaranteed the right of freedom of religion, and no one could infringe on this. Similarly, people could voluntarily choose to believe in any religion and could voluntarily participate in all religious activities. By the same token, people had the right to cease believing in any religion. The key was that religious belief would take place on a voluntary basis, Hung said. The Ambassador observed that how this new law was implemented and disseminated would be key and added that having a senior Vietnamese official speak out on the subject would send an important message.

19. (SBU) Turning to the subject of a roadmap for the bilateral relationship in the coming months, the Ambassador noted that VFM Phung would likely be asked about the possibility of PM Khai's visit next year or a visit by Politburo member Phan Dien before that. Hung said that, before the U.S. Presidential election, it was "not appropriate" to discuss this issue, but it could be discussed after the election.

110. (SBU) On the subject of recent visa difficulties experienced by "D" visa holders visiting Vietnam, Hung said that this was more a subject for the Consular Department, but added that Minister Nien himself had been made aware of the issue.

111. (SBU) Hung agreed with the Ambassador that cooperation in HIV/AIDS prevention was an important bilateral area and

noted that MFA was working with the Ministry of Health to set up an interagency committee. The Ambassador urged MFA to play a leading role in this committee because of the important policy issues that would come up in the future.

112. (SBU) Hung said that the two sides had managed to move the bilateral relationship forward in spite of the difficulties that arose because of the war in Iraq and expressed his confidence that the United States and Vietnam could continue to find areas to move forward. The Ambassador agreed that there were many areas with potential for further cooperation, such as counter-terrorism and intelligence sharing. The Ambassador noted that another area requiring continued cooperation -- the acquisition of the land for a new U.S. Embassy -- demanded our immediate attention, and Hung described this as a "headache," particularly since the officials in Russia responsible for the issue had changed. Hung assured the Ambassador that, in spite of signs that the Hanoi People's Committee was attempting to "shop around" the land the USG hoped to purchase, the "Deputy Prime Minister is still more powerful than the Chairman of the Hanoi People's Committee."

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